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BIRDS FROM A SICK MAN'S WINDOW

BY W. ELMER EKBLAW

Always interested in birds from the viewpoint of a scientist, and as a Nature lover glad of their beauty and song and companionship, I had never truly appreciated how much I owed to them until I was kept in my room, an unwilling prisoner, to recover from a minor operation. Though my imprisonment lasted for but ten days of the most delightful and pleasant May weather, I chafed restively against even so brief a period of restraint and confinement indoors, for I had ever been accustomed to wander freely as I chose.

During this time the birds were one of my chiefest solaces as they came before my window, a window which overlooked numerous war-gardens and service yards, long lines of telephone wires held up by three poles within view, a garage, and a clump of witch-hazel and black cherry. Many vacant lots overgrown by bluegrass and shrubbery, and the University forestry, stretched away beyond the gardens to the University farms. All about me were tall trees that shade the streets and homes of the University residence section.

I mention these surroundings of mine to explain in a measure how it came to pass that so many birds came to see me. The environment was somewhat unusual for some city homes, but not wholly unlike that of many suburban localities. In many a neighborhood even more favorable to bird life, an invalid might easily record a longer list of feathered visitors; but my purpose is to give due credit to those who did so much to sustain my patience, and help the days pass fast and pleasantly.

When I was brought home from the hospital I had scarcely settled myself comfortably in my cot before a full-voiced cardinal called to me from the tip-most branch of a black cherry. It was his vibrant mating-song to which he gave voice, every note coming in through my window,

rich and clear like the notes of a flute. He was a faithful songster and though I did not once see him until I was out-of-doors again, he did not fail to greet me a single day. There is something so cheerful, so hopeful, so full of promise, in the passionate song of the cardinal that man must wax optimistic when he hears it.

Like the flute-toned song of the cardinal is the warbling whistle of the meadowlark, in its thrilling message of joy and encouragement. Two pairs nested in the tussocky grass of nearby vacant lots. Perched upon the telephone poles or the black cherry treelets they responded in antiphonal chorus to the challenging morning call of the robins or the ringing song of the cardinal. Perhaps I was prejudiced in favor of the meadowlarks because I could see them and delight so much in their bright golden waistcoats and jaunty demeanor, but I believe that to a sick man they seem the sweetest songsters of all.

The robins came, not only to entertain me with their cheer-up songs, but to let me supervise their wooing, their house-building materials, and their domestic felicities and infelicities. On the yard and in the garden beneath my window many things happened too intimate to publish. They courted and wooed assiduously; they searched about for nesting-materials; they quarreled and scolded, or hopped about in contented groups like staid householders. Even while visiting me, they were too thrifty to let a June-bug or cutworm escape, even if it might not be the best of manners to catch it in company.

One early morning I was surprised to see an oven-bird sneaking stealthily along under the witch-hazel as if he feared to intrude upon my privacy. He came to see me several days in succession, but not once did he burst forth into that cataclysmic torrent of song that so often surges through the woods he frequents. For five years I had not seen or heard the oven-bird, and I rejoiced that he came to greet me.

No matter how early I woke, often when the gray light

of dawn was just coming into the east, the first sound I heard was the distant booming of the prairie chickens on the University farm, where they mate, and nest, and live, unmolested. No sound more vividly suggests the free, zestful prairie dawns than this booming of the prairie-chicken, or recalls the purple morning hazes lying in the west, on the far horizon where day has not yet broken.

The flicker was another early morning bird whose rollicking spring song sometimes woke me with a start, thinking that I heard friendly laughter beside my window. Dozens of his family came to call upon me through the long days, or greeted me hilariously as they flew up to a telephone pole after a full meal of ants, or some juicy morsel to pick to pieces and devour. The flicker is a good fellow to call upon an invalid, for despite his unconventionality and his jocularly he is interesting and entertaining every minute, and courteous and considerate as a true-born gentleman. He would be a good Y. M. C. A. secretary, I feel sure.

Not such a thorough gentleman because of his loud voice and inconsiderate curiosity, the blue jay is on the whole not such an undesirable visitor as his reputation might lead one to expect. One came to see me twice, quite out of the goodness of his heart, I believe, and each time I was sorry, when, because of urgent business elsewhere, he took his departure. I imagined that they were family affairs that engrossed his attention, but he did not take me into his confidence.

A score or more of grackles followed behind a plow that was breaking up a well-sodded vacant lot a block away, but not one came near enough to pass the time of day with me. I rather resented their neglect, but I reflected philosophically that while such an abundance of food was being provided them, they felt constrained to care for it with true win-the-war thrift.

The only unpleasant incident that marred my whole sick-window record of the birds, was an unprovoked and

utterly uncalled-for assault of a pair of kingbirds upon two sedate, unoffending crows that flew by my window nearly every day on their way to and from the forestry. I had come to feel a great deal of respect for these crows that went so unassumingly about their own business, and I was quite indignant when they were insulted and assaulted by the vindictive kingbirds. I had heard or seen nothing of these tyrants before, and not once afterward did they appear; but on this one occasion they monopolized the attention of the whole neighborhood as they indulged their inherent family hatred of the poor crows, who, I am sure, would be only too glad to let the old feud die out.

The same day that this unpleasant episode of the kingbirds occurred, I was more than compensated by hearing the song-sparrow greet me from the witch-hazel thicket with a burst of happy song that quite diverted my mind from the recent unpleasantness. He sang but this once for me, and though I listened long for another greeting, I never heard it. Once, too, and only once, his cousin the vesper sparrow sang to me, but did not come to call upon me, much to my regret.

My most faithful songsters were a brown thrasher that frequented a young orchard not far from my window, and a wren that had a nest under the eaves of the garage even nearer. The brown thrasher seemed to take it upon himself to keep me happy and content, for his gay, sweet song never failed me for very long a single day.

He came to visit me often, too, and strolled tranquilly about the yard beneath the window, very much at home on my premises, as becomes a good friend. The sociable little wren came "jinking" about my window, intent upon telling me all about his nest, but when he sang I felt sure he was singing not to me at all, but to his little brown mate on the nest under the eaves, the demure little housewife about whom he was ever so solicitous.

A flash of blue darting about the clump of witch-hazel one noon-day apprised me of the coming of other callers, a

pair of indigo buntings. I suspect that they were out foraging or house-hunting, rather than intending to call, but when they heard that I was ill, they were kind enough to stay for quite ten minutes to gossip with me. At any rate they did not leave the witch-hazel until we had had quite a visit together.

I can not neglect longer the mention of the English Sparrow. He and I have been bad friends for a long time, and when we meet on the streets we do not notice each other. The dislike is reciprocal, deep-seated, and well-founded. Between his family and mine is a long record of enmity and persecution. But in all justice, I must admit that he and many of his relatives appeared before my window, and though they chattered noisily and ill-manneredly, as is their wont, they spent long hours entertaining me; I feel now that probably some of my antipathy toward his family may be misplaced, at any rate somewhat unnecessary.

Likewise the cat-bird rose considerably in my estimation. He and his mate came to see me often, and though I had never had any quarrel with them, I had not fully appreciated before their whole-souled optimism and friendliness. He sang often to me, especially in the mornings. I was quite won by the friendly familiarity of the family, and I have assured myself that in the future I shall more confidently and openmindedly cultivate their acquaintance. They are nothing if not shrewd, and neighborly.

The yellow-billed cuckoos, the mourning doves, and the yellow-breasted chats were other daily callers. The cuckoos came to tell me of impending rains that never came, but I never grew tired of watching their swelling throats as they uttered their queer notes. The mourning doves acted in much the same manner when giving voice to their plaintive coos so that I wondered if they had been trained in the same schools. I was pleased and flattered by the visits the chats paid me, for I had never before become well acquainted with them.

A pair of goldfinches, who made their summer home in our part of town and nested in a Lombardy poplar across the way, came often to call. Sometimes it was Mrs. Goldfinch who came, sometimes it was Mr. Goldfinch. Neither of them stayed long at a time, but Mr. Goldfinch came oftener, or at least seemed to do so. It may have been that he made himself more evident, for his sharp call and conspicuous garb would always attract attention.

The friends of my early boyhood, the bluebirds, came but once to cheer me, but the gentle and sincere greeting they gave me as a reminder of old times touched me deeply. The bluebirds are like those old, tried, true friends in whom our faith never wavers, and of whom a doubt or suspicion never enters our minds. We may not see them, or hear from them for months or years, but when we do, we know that they have not changed.

Hardly less welcome than the bluebirds, the red-headed woodpeckers greeted me often. Frequently a pair of them perched on the nearest telephone pole. I am sure they came to call on me, but as they gossiped, they usually grew so interested in their own affairs that they quite forgot me. Not sensitive to their neglect—unintentional it was, I am sure—I thoroughly enjoyed hearing them chatter, just the same.

The evenings of my days were usually lonesome, but then it was that Bob White called to me from the edge of the forestry, and the swallows came sweeping over the vacant lots, and the swifts fluttering home to their own chimney-corners. Now and then a flock of nighthawks came coursing along, stooping in abrupt nose-dives like aviators in training. Always their course lay eastward; I wished that some of them had stopped to tell me why, for here on the prairies their sunset flight is always into the approaching dusk.

After night-fall the screech owls came to see me. The whole family, five or six, fluttered about my window, perching on the clothes-poles, the ridge-pole of the garage, or

wherever a convenient corner projected. Without uttering a note, they frequently exchanged perches, as if they were engaged in a strigidine "pussy wants a corner"; they were silent as wraiths, but their big, bright eyes saw everything.

When I was able to be about and out-of-doors again, I soon became too deeply engrossed in my work to give to my bird-friends the attention they deserved, but my heart will ever be grateful to them for the entertainment they afforded me while time passed so slowly.

THE LURE OF THE GODWIT.

He approached me whenever I visited the Yellow Rail Coulee in the Choctaw Basin, Benson County, North Dakota. T'was difficult to determine the direction from which this Marbled Godwit came. Before I could see, away in the distance, his voice of suspicion would pierce the horizon and over the ridge he skimmed with the wing strokes similar to a Killdeer.

I climbed through the slopes of badger brush where a Prairie Sharp-tail Grouse had a setting of fifteen eggs, and hunted up and down the uncultivated patches. This wary Marlin stood in the grass close by and scrutinized my actions.

The Western Willet surveyed conditions from "on wing" but never pausing to alight even though he manifested considerable curiosity at my presence.

In the Red River Valley of Minnesota there were quite a few Godwits this spring. Heavy rains and "no shooting" contributed largely to the conditions which made the environment attractive. Residents said the "Indian Moccasin State" was fast losing its virgin prairies, but I saw thousands of acres undisturbed and without fences. After visiting the headquarters of the Red River of the North and the Mississippi and making an inventory of the bird life now in evidence, I found Minnesota more promising than North Dakota, for waders. Dakota is still par excellence